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ABSTRACT

A study evaluated the 83 basic skills open learning centers established in England and Wales to improve opportunities for adults and young people to improve essential basic skills. They were established in a variety of locations, ranging from further education colleges or adult education centers to libraries and shops. The most successful centers in reaching target enrollments were relatively easy to get to, in busy well-populated areas, served by good public transport, well publicized, and identified by signs. Each tried to develop a layout that allowed maximum self-access for users. A distinguishing feature was the quality of the publicity material produced. Effective recruitment approaches were campaigns targeted at specific groups or at improving specific skills, good liaison with other agencies, and word of mouth. Centers needed to monitor opening times and use rigorously and to adapt and adjust in light of review. The center initiative demonstrated that successful open learning had to include an individual initial interview, needs assessment, induction, individual negotiated learning plan, and monitoring of progress and assessment. Approaches to learning included the following: short courses, distance learning, accreditation, learning support, work-related basic skills and training, English for speakers of other languages, and information technology. Support was provided by volunteers and other students. (Addresses and telephone numbers of the centers are appended.) (YLB)

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OPEN LEARNING CENTRES

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ALBSU
The Basic Skills Unit

Open Learning Centres in England and Wales 1988-92

ALBSU
The Basic Skills Unit

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Foreword

BETWEEN 1988 and 1992 almost £7 million additional funding was made available by central government for the establishment of 83 basic skills open learning centres in England and Wales. We directly funded 10 of these centres in inner city areas of England and a further centre as part of the Valleys Initiative in Wales. The remaining centres were established through Education Support Grants (ESGs). Seventy two LEAs benefited from this ESG.

We were asked by the Education Departments to support, monitor and evaluate all the centres. We agreed to report on the effectiveness of these, somewhat experimental, basic skills open learning centres, including how far they represented 'value for money'. In 1990 we produced and published an initial progress report, although some centres had only just been set up. Her Majesty's Inspectorate also produced a report on the Basic Skills Open Learning Centres in 1992 based on experience in a small number of centres.

'Basic Skills Open Learning Centres 1988-1992' evaluates the centres based on our experience of monitoring all 83 centres. We have not tried to provide an evaluation of each individual centre, however, or even to make sure that every centre is mentioned specifically by name. Many centres have produced their own reports on their work and most are usually pleased to share these with anyone interested. We have sometimes used individual centres to reinforce or illustrate a point; we could have named others and using one centre should not be taken to mean that this is the only centre that operated in the way described.

These centres were very much a new departure in basic skills work, although open learning has been available to some students for some time. Nothing has been available, however, on the scale of this initiative. For example in 1982 only 15% of basic skills programmes had access to computers and other new technology (a feature of all of the Open Learning Centres); access is now a common feature of much basic skills work and the Open Learning Centres played a major part in increasing access.

We have tried to be honest about what worked and what didn't. Some aspects of these centres worked more effectively than others; some centres were more successful than similar centres in other areas and we have tried to identify the elements which led to success. The conclusions we draw are necessarily our own, although I believe that they are supported by the experience of most open learning centres.

I have visited a number of the basic skills open learning centres and I have been struck by the flexibility they provide, by the access to new technology and the very real commitment of students and staff. The Basic Skills Open Learning Centres have been a very worthwhile investment, particularly as they have increased choice and very much influenced the improvement in quality of recent years. I believe that they will make a significant contribution to the development of basic skills for some time to come.

Alan Wells,
Director, ALBSU

Statistical Summary

BETWEEN 1990-1992 THE 83 BASIC SKILLS OPEN LEARNING CENTRES PROVIDED HELP WITH BASIC SKILLS FOR **39,212** PEOPLE.

THE TARGET NUMBERS FOR THE 83 CENTRES IN THE SAME PERIOD WAS **22,000**.

OF THE **39,212 USERS** OF THE CENTRES:

57%	WERE NEW TO BASIC SKILLS
30%	WERE UNEMPLOYED
20%	WERE IN FULL-TIME WORK
7%	WERE IN PART-TIME WORK
8%	WERE HOMECARERS
8%	WERE IN ADULT TRAINING SCHEMES
53%	WERE WOMEN
13%	WERE BETWEEN 16-20 YEARS OLD
34%	WERE 21-30
30%	WERE 31-35
23%	WERE OVER 40 YEARS OF AGE.

THE COST OF THE OPEN LEARNING CENTRES WAS APPROXIMATELY **£7.5 MILLION**.

Introduction

'BASIC Skills Open Learning Centres 1988-92' describes and attempts to analyse what worked and what didn't work in open learning centres developed to improve opportunities for adults and young people to improve essential basic skills. By basic skills we mean:

'the ability to read, write, and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general'.

In Wales, basic skills include the ability to read and write Welsh for people whose first language or mother tongue is Welsh. Basic skills does not include necessarily wider provision for adults and young people with special needs, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or general access and return to study courses.

A national initiative to develop open learning centres for basic skills took place between 1988-92. These open learning centres were intended to:

'encourage authorities to provide centres with trained staff, computers and audio visual equipment, where adults with literacy and numeracy problems can receive tuition, supplemented by self-study at home and by complementary face to face tuition'.

A new style of basic skills work was introduced which was intended to allow students to have a wider choice of learning opportunities and to provide greater flexibility. There had been some limited development of open learning for a number of years and an open learning centre had been developed by Leeds LEA through ALBSU funding at 6 Boar Lane in the late 1970s.

Most basic skills work had been centred around individual teaching or small group work. Few students were able to get more than 1-2 hours of teaching a week and many programmes closed down during the lengthy adult and further education breaks in the Summer and at Christmas. Open learning centres were intended to provide more opportunities for learning, greater flexibility and the opportunity to attend for more than 1-2 hours a week.

For many basic skills teachers, open learning was a considerable change from previous practice. They had to become used to more flexible delivery, learning plans for every individual, short courses and 'tailor-made' teaching and learning material. Open Learning Centres were expected to attract new client groups, often with different motivations and different goals from other students.

Working in an Open Learning Centre meant changes in practice for many teachers and volunteer tutors. However, most staff who became involved in open learning centres came with positive practices which they had developed in more 'traditional' provision. Many had considerable experience in:

- induction and initial assessment
- developing materials for individuals and small groups
- using student-centred approaches in setting goals and assessing progress
- practice which underpins open learning.

Staff were also committed to trying to make basic skills provision flexible and some had already been involved in trying to remove the constraints of much existing basic skills learning opportunities. Sometimes, however, lack of resources or institutional bureaucracy meant that provision could often not be as flexible or accessible as most people would like.

There are many different definitions of the term 'open learning'. We don't intend, however, to go into them here. Open learning in this Report refers to supported learning, the support being given by basic skills teachers and tutors. It is not about 'distance learning' or about centres filled with self-access equipment and standard learning packages. Rather it describes an environment where people are helped to gain information and support and improve skills with the help of teachers, volunteer tutors and other staff.

There are particular issues in delivering open learning in basic skills, however, which require different approaches from some other education and training. Difficulties with reading, speaking and understanding English and writing often affect a student's ability to use independent learning material. Furthermore, some basic skills students require much more direct tutor or resource support than other students or trainees using open learning.

In our view, there are three key concepts that underpin good practice in open learning in basic skills.

1. Choice

Students in open learning centres should be able to:

- make use of whatever learning media is most suitable
- go to the centre at the times they find most convenient
- have control over the way in which they learn.

While these are often said to be the aims of all basic skills provision, limitations of time, venue and style are very common.

2. Independence

Open learning centre students need to be encouraged to:

- set their own goals
- assess their own work without constant supervision of a teacher or a tutor.

The ability to take decisions about appropriate material, degree of accuracy and sources for further work may be difficult for some students with basic skills problems – but it can be achieved in open learning.

3. Progression

Progression is important in open learning centres. It is important, therefore, that:

- learning objectives and goals are clearly defined and understood
- a framework for learning is established
- progression routes are identified.

Any evaluation of the effectiveness of open learning centres needs to consider the:

- location of centres
- opening and closing times
- styles of learning and teaching
- learning which took place
- support for students attending open learning centres.

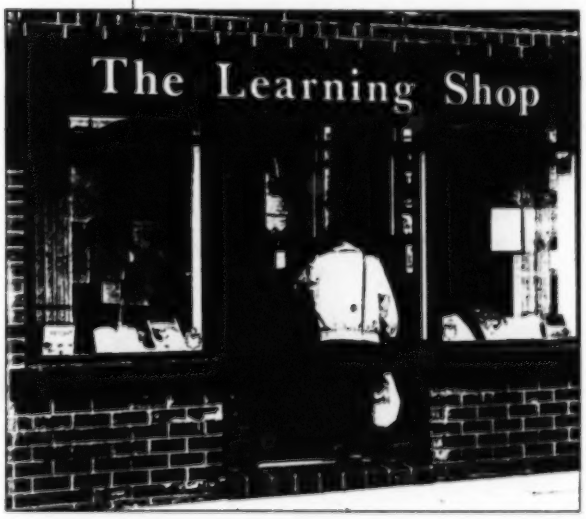
1

Access

THE 83 open learning centres in England and Wales were established in a variety of different locations. Some were integral parts of a further education college or an adult education centre. Others were in community schools or in community centres. A few were in libraries. A small number were in high street shops. The more exotic were in a converted pub, a church manse in rural Wales, a former doctors surgery and a former high street bank.

High Street Shops

A considerable number of diverse factors influenced where an open learning centre could be located. Choice was usually limited by cost and availability. High street shops, for instance, were often only available at high rents or for a short period. Often if landlords were prepared to make them available they couldn't give any real idea of for how long they could be used. Even if these difficulties could be overcome, the space available was often too limited or too inconveniently laid out to be much use.



Some open learning centres in shops proved very effective, however, especially in attracting a more diverse range of students – particularly beginners in basic skills – than in other centres. In Bolton, for instance, the Learning Shop in the town centre, whilst recruiting many 'committed' students, also attracted passing general inquirers for whom 'on the spot' guidance could be provided.

It is the immediate access provided by high street shops – the lack of physical and bureaucratic barriers – that seemed to encourage more 'beginner' students to use these centres. A lot more people who used these centres also wanted help with very specific, often single tasks, and dropped in, sometimes only once or twice.

People who used high street shop based centres also wanted more advice and guidance than those using other open learning centres. High street open learning centres also reported higher numbers of initial enquiries than other centres, although many of these enquiries did not result in a new student. Certainly, there was not a significantly higher recruitment rate for the high street centres, in comparison with other open learning centres as a whole.

Most enquiries were about education and training and answering them took time. Often evaluation does not take account of enquiries which don't lead to recruitment, although clearly a useful service has been provided for someone. Certainly plans had to be adjusted in some centres to take account of the cost of providing this type of help, including funding for training staff to cope with the reception/advice and guidance work generated by passing users.

Libraries

A place that is often central, but not necessarily as expensive as a high street shop, is the Public Library. Libraries are often very accessible and provide good locations for basic skills at modest cost. The commitment of many libraries to basic skills has been too rarely acknowledged. Libraries often provide space for basic skills groups, many have collections of teaching and

learning material which they loan to students and teachers and most libraries have been only too willing to help with publicity and information about basic skills. The Library Service in England and Wales continues to play a key role in the development of basic skills.

Many libraries are located with other services such as Housing Offices, Advice and Guidance Centres, Leisure Services and Childcare and Health Clinics. The open learning centre in Rhyl in North Wales is based in a multi-purpose community building, which includes a library and this has been a very successful centre.

Much of the success of the open learning centre in Rhyl and of other similar centres has been due to the availability of several different services in the same place. Positive partnerships have usually been developed with other agencies where open learning centres have been set up on shared sites. In some places, a 'one stop shop' approach is being developed.

When negotiating space for an open learning centre on a multi-use site, however, it is essential to ensure that only the site is shared with the other agencies, not the learning space. Shared space presents considerable problems particularly when attendance is difficult to predict and much work is confidential.

Further Education Colleges

Basic skills open learning centres in further education colleges had the advantage of being accessible to 'mainstream' college staff and students. Often they became the focus for learning support throughout the college. Since central funding has ended a number of these centres have expanded to include wider learning support, alongside basic skills.

This effect on the work of a college in general did not happen everywhere, however. In some places the location of the basic skills open learning centre in the college or the management of the centre in the college's structure led to a good deal of isolation and the waste of a potential resource.

Some basic skills open learning centres were placed in an annex or in outbuildings of the main college and this had some attraction. It decreased the hesitancy of some new students and provided a distinct ethos and image. However in some cases the centre became isolated from the college and played little part in ensuring that learning support was available to all students. Often scarce resources, such as new technology, was duplicated and staff concerned primarily with 'mainstream' courses saw the open learning centre as a short-term, 'bolt-on' to the college, rather than something integral.

Adult and Community Education Centres

There were advantages in locating basic skills open learning centres in adult or community education centres and managing them as part of the general management of the centre. In some areas the basic skills service was managed as a part of adult or community education and the staff involved had considerable experience of basic skills work. They were used to outreach, induction and providing help with basic skills for adults and they had a community orientated ethos.

However, often the centre was seen as only relevant for 'primary basic skills provision' for people in the local community. Often the pattern of the rest of the centre was very

different to that of the open learning centre and progression was sometimes minimal except to adult or community education classes which offered qualifications in English or mathematics. (Few students progressed to general adult or community education courses whilst progression in further education college based centres was much more significant). Sometimes progression to these classes was a major step because of the different approach in the class than in the open learning centre and drop-out was high.

Rural Centres

It is much easier to set up basic skills programmes in urban, densely populated areas than in more rural areas. Lack of funding and the small number of students recruited in many rural areas has meant that there has often had to be undue concentration of resources in cities and suburbs and people living in more rural areas have had little choice except individual, often home, teaching. We wanted to ensure that the open learning centres initiative did not continue this practice and pass rural areas by so both ALBSU and the education departments were keen to support open learning centres in rural areas of England and Wales.

About 25% of the basic skills open learning centres established were in rural areas and some were very effective bearing in mind the lower number of prospective students in travelling distance of the centre. Transport difficulties and travel costs had a major effect on recruitment of students in more rural areas, although these problems are not unique to basic skills.

Student numbers in rural areas will never be large, although some centres were very successful in maximising the effectiveness of open learning centres in rural areas. For example, Somerset LEA took a particularly imaginative approach and set a network of small basic skills open learning centres in different areas of the County. Part of the attraction of these centres in Somerset was supported self-study, including some 'distance learning', with students going to the centre mainly to collect assignments or to attend assessment sessions. If the need for help with basic skills in more isolated communities is to be met, we need further work on open learning centres as providers of 'distance learning' and supported self-study and we need to harness Information Technology,perhaps by linking centres to the developing Tele-cottage network.

Reaching Targets

The location of the centre seems to be a key factor where open learning centres struggled to meet their enrolment targets. These centres were often in:

- neighbourhoods with high levels of crime against the person
- poor lighting
- inadequate public transport
- inaccessible entry routes (e.g. a circuitous route through a community or further education college)
- poor sign posting.

Centres which had one or more of these characteristics often had problems with attendance as well as with the overall number of users of the centre. In some areas there was a particular problem with attendance in the evening because of fears about personal safety, this particularly affected women.

Some open learning centres took positive action to improve accessibility. In Middlesborough, for instance, a centre run by Longlands College had excellent day-time attendance but it was felt that poor street lighting made it difficult for people to attend in the evening. Pressure from the Centre and the College led to improved street lighting and a noticeable improvement in evening attendance.

In general the most successful centres in reaching target enrolments were:

- relatively easy to get to
- in busy well populated areas
- served by good public transport
- well publicised
- well sign posted.

Space and Layout

Whatever the location one advantage that all of the centres should have enjoyed was a high quality, well-decorated and well-equipped working environment. Every centre tried to develop a layout which allowed maximum self-access for users. Some centres were more successful in this than others. For example in some centres the space available and the design of the building imposed severe limitations. The space was just too small for the number of students or the amount of equipment; sometimes the space was OK but it was just badly distributed and little could be done about it. Sometimes joint use of facilities or space had not been thought through well enough and material couldn't be displayed permanently because of the demand of other services.

Many of the open learning centres adopted similar layout plans for equipment and furniture and learnt from each other. Although the size and often the number of rooms varied considerably from centre to centre, most centres tried to find space for:

- a reception area
- interviewing
- teaching
- essential administration.

Centres also had to work out where to site or store:

- work tables
- computers and printers
- TV, videos and other equipment such as audio cassettes, etc.
- paper based material
- student files
- stationery.

Some centres developed a less formal area, with easy chairs, and struck a balance between this and more formal work areas. This arrangement appeared to have helped to maximise the number of users of the centre at any one time.

A good example of careful attention to layout and the use of the available space was the Bristol Open Learning Centre. The Centre is based in a shop and is arranged on three levels. Access for people with physical disabilities has been taken into account in the use of the space available on the ground floor, although lack of a lift or special facilities means that access is still limited for some students. The ground floor is given over to a Reception and Information Area and has easy chairs and information about what the Centre offers and about other local education and training opportunities. The First and Second floors is where the main teaching and learning takes place.

Bristol is one of the larger open learning centres, however, and in some smaller centres it was not possible to make such a neat division between reception, information and teaching areas or between formal and informal working areas. In some centres reception space had to be constructed using portable screens. Similarly some centres did not have separate space for interviewing and teaching and administration. This created considerable problems, particularly as it was impossible to conduct confidential interviews and tutorials when there was a very real danger of being overheard or at the least being disturbed by noise.

Childcare and Creches

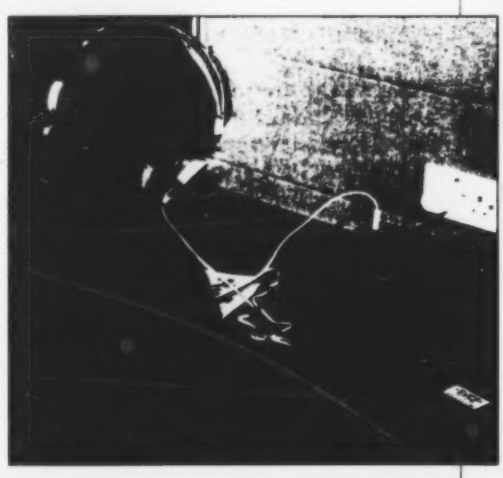
Only a small number of open learning centres had either a creche of their own or access to a shared creche. In most cases where there was shared use of a creche, the open learning centre was allocated a number of places in the creche which was usually run by the host institution (often a college or adult education centre). The nature of open learning meant that on some days the creche places were all used, and on other days, if only a few students attended, there were spare places. This led to some understandable tension with other users of the creche who were not able to get access even though places ended up not being filled.

Only about 1% of students leaving open learning centres gave childcare difficulties as their reason for leaving. However, many open learning centres did not have creche or other childcare provision and it's likely that some people with children under school age did not go to centres because they had to care for children. Certainly where effective creche provision has been established a noticeable increase in the recruitment of female students has taken place.

Where organisational difficulties were overcome or a centre had its own creche, use of the creche was good. Certainly, we believe that there should be a creche or other facilities in all basic skills centres if equal access for people with childcare responsibilities is to become a reality.

Students with Disabilities

In general, access for disabled students to open learning centres was not good. To some extent this mirrors the difficulty of access for students with disabilities to much education and training but more should have been done to take account of the needs of this important group. The pace with which the basic skills open learning centres initiative had to be established meant that too little time was available to look for the ideal location for a centre and buildings with good access for people with disabilities are few and far between. Many centres tried as best they could by siting essential equipment so that students with disabilities had access to it; in very few centres was there equal access to all of the facilities of the centre.



Recording Use

The use of technology (such as the software package OLAF which allowed users to register attendance by using a swipe card system) helped centres record and monitor use. It enabled individual and multiple patterns of attendance to be monitored and this aided planning. Each student was issued with a card with a bar-code and their name on it. They were responsible for logging-in out of the centre. ALBSU made additional funds available to support the introduction of this software into over twenty centres.

2

Publicity and Recruitment

A DISTINGUISHING feature of open learning centres was the quality of the publicity material produced. In-house Desk Top Publishing (DTP) facilities enabled many centres to produce publicity material of a high standard, quickly and cheaply. Some centres cooperated to produce publicity material. For instance, the open learning centres in the North-west of England formed a consortium that produced high quality publicity for marketing their services to industry. Many centres developed a distinctive logo to identify themselves as open learning centres for basic skills. The Oldham and Llanelli centres even used their logo on promotional materials such as tee-shirts and pens.

The Second Chance Centre in Rhyl and the Llanelli Open Learning Centre produced bi-lingual material in Welsh and English. Most centres in areas where a significant number of people were from minority ethnic communities produced material in a number of different languages. The Tower Hamlets Open Learning Centre in London, produced all of its publicity materials in English and Bengali and much material in Turkish and Somali.

Almost every centre used a variety of publicity material including leaflets, mail-shots, newspaper features and advertisements, poster campaigns on public transport and local radio and regional television. Often centres held open days and publicity launches and asked well known local or national figures to help. For instance, the DISC centre in Liverpool was opened by the writer Willy Russell and the ABLE Centre in Oxford by the Rt.Hon. Michael Heseltine MP. These public events were used to bring the centres to the attention of local employers, potential students, community

groups, Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and other referral agencies, such as the Careers and Employment services.

Most centres tried to closely monitor the recruitment of students. The most effective approaches were:

- campaigns targeted at specific groups
- good liaison with other agencies, such as CABs, health and housing organisations, social services, etc.
- campaigns targeted at improving specific skills
- word of mouth.

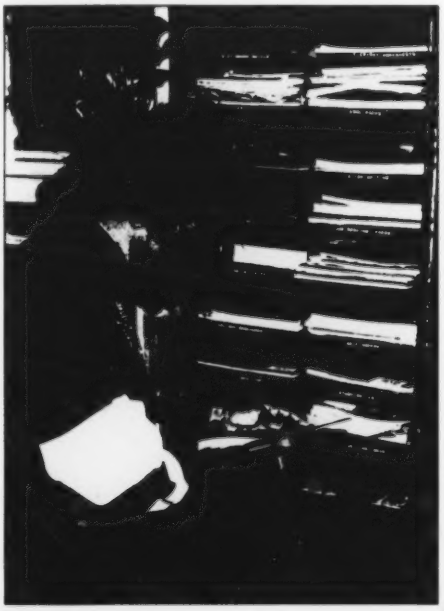
Word of mouth proved to be an effective means of publicity for open learning centres and one new student often brought in a number of other new students.

Some publicity campaigns were successful in one area but not in another. For example, a Public Service Announcement (PSA) across the Tyne-Tees TV region, undertaken by five open learning centres, produced very few responses. In contrast a PSA on Anglia TV by the Cambridgeshire Open Learning Centres produced a lot of enquiries and a significant number of new students. There is no obvious reason why this should be the case.

Publicity was most effective when aimed at a particular group or focused on a particular issue. More general publicity, especially leaflets, seemed to take longer to be effective, particularly if distributed via key social agencies such as Health and Job centres.

One of the least effective methods of publicity used by open learning centres appeared to be relying on the inclusion of information in college and adult education prospectuses. Newspaper advertisements were also very ineffective, although editorial features in local newspapers did produce enquiries and new students.

Centres reported a significant increase in enquiries and enrolments after a feature article. The key factors in obtaining coverage appear to have been novelty (open learning is a new way of learning) and human interest. The personal nature of features seems to have been particularly important as against the more formal nature of newspaper advertising. The classified advertisements pages of newspapers also require sophisticated skimming and scanning skills which many people who want help with basic skills do not possess.



Articles featuring a student or students at the open learning centres were very effective in recruiting new students. Many centres used students receiving an award such as a Wordpower or Numberpower Certificate as a central feature of press publicity.

3

Opening Times/ Closing Times

FOR open learning to be effective, a centre needs to get the opening and closing times right. There is little point in finding a good location, spending a lot of time organising the space available, classifying materials, developing effective publicity and producing learning packages, if people cannot get into the centre at the times it suits them.

Each open learning centre had to decide:

- when the centre should be open?
- when staff need to be available?

Deciding how many hours a day and days per week a centre was to be open was, of course, influenced by funding levels and staffing. Other factors also influenced times of opening, such as the type of building within which a centre was situated and the availability of other support services like a creche, canteen or bar. Although colleges and adult education centres tried to be as flexible as possible, it was sometimes difficult to open a whole institution just for the open learning centre.

Every centre had some restriction on opening times, although the situation was worse in some centres than in others. For instance the level of central funding through ESGs for open learning centres was quite modest. (Approximately £50,000 in the first year and £25,000 in the two subsequent years). Inner City centres were more generously funded (£80,000 in year 1 and £45,000 in year 2) although for a shorter period.

In some LEAs additional funding was provided locally over and above the local contribution required for ESGs and this meant that staffing levels were adequate, if not necessarily generous. However, where additional funding was not available staffing levels were barely adequate and many centres could only cope through restricting opening hours and only opening on 2-3 days of the week. Many centres were, in effect, part-time. Restricted opening was a major factor where open learning centres failed to meet enrolment targets.

There are no rules about patterns of opening of open learning centres. What is clear is that open learning centres need to rigorously monitor both opening times and the use of the centre regularly and adapt and adjust in the light of review. Demand does change and a centre has to adapt its pattern of work to meet that demand, not expect students to fit its established time-table.

To cope with demand which could not be met in the hours available some open learning centres moved to deliberately restricting access or learning by appointments systems. Others rationed the time available or provided access to material without teacher support. This inevitably effected the 'openness' of open learning centres.

Centres tried to take account of student demand and the views of users in fixing opening times.

- Some centres opened regularly on Saturday mornings for individual tutorial or self-study. This was in response to requests from students for a 'quiet' time when the phone was not always ringing. Others opened on Saturdays as they found that people combined some study with city/town centre shopping. (To meet the needs of a local Chinese community one centre opened on a Sunday).
- 'Twilight' time (4.00pm to 7.00pm) was popular in some centres and was attractive to people who wanted to attend after work, rather than go home and come back to the centre in the evening. Students who attended during 'twilight' time were usually in work and were more often men than women. The average length of attendance was short. (About an hour). Students used the time for tutorials, to deliver and discuss assignments, to collect assignments or to study. 'Twilight' time opening was most successful in town or city-centre based centres.

There are no rules about patterns of opening of open learning centres. What is clear is that open learning centres need to rigorously monitor both opening times and the use of the centre regularly and adapt and adjust in the light of review. Demand does change and a centre has to adapt its pattern of work to meet that demand, not expect students to fit its established time-table.

4

Induction, Learning Plans and Assessment

OPEN learning places a great deal of the responsibility on the individual student. Independent learning skills have to be developed and students have to understand the process, responsibilities and system used in open learning. The open learning centres initiative demonstrated that successful open learning has to include:

- an individual initial interview
- accurate assessment of need
- sensitive induction
- an individual negotiated learning plan
- regular monitoring of progress and assessment.

Initial Interview and Assessment

In much basic skills provision the initial interview and assessment is effected by understandable anxiety. The anxiety is to place a student in a class or provide individual teaching as soon as possible before motivation disappears. Often this means that the initial interview and assessment, where it takes place at all, is rarely in much depth. Inappropriate placement is common (sometimes because little choice is available, of course) and about 27% of all basic skills students drop-out in the first month of teaching.

Most of the open learning centres recognised that open learning would not suit all students, although the very attractiveness of the centres meant that students wanted to join. (The attractiveness of open learning centres contrasts with the drab surroundings of much other basic skills provision). Sometimes people wanted to come to an open learning centre to get access to new, up-to-date, technology although they didn't have any real problems with basic skills. So some initial interview process and assessment was essential.

Most of the centres in the initiative had to adopt strategies to prevent over, rather than under, use. The majority of centres developed an admissions policy. Whilst some were required to adopt the approach offered by their 'host' organisation, most open learning centres developed their own guidelines for the admission of basic skills students.

The key elements in most guidelines for admission were:

- basic skills needs
- motivation
- an ability to work independently.

In the few open learning centres where guidelines were not developed, or were developed too late, open learning often lapsed into workshop or 'class' provision with fixed attendance times.

Ability to work independently appears to be more crucial to the success of a student improving their basic skills in an open learning centre than the student's level of attainment on entry. For students who found independent study and learning difficult, whatever their level of attainment, open learning was not appropriate.

Most open learning centres did develop rigorous procedures for initial interview and assessment, although some took longer than others. Whilst approaches varied from centre to centre, common features included:

- a confidential individual interview
- the identification of aims and learning goals
- systematic assessment of basic skills strengths and weaknesses.

Some open learning centres attempted to interview and carry out an assessment of basic skills at the same time while others separated the interview and assessment, assessment often taking place a week or two after the initial interview.

A variety of material was used for assessing basic skills needs including self-assessment material and published programmes such as the *'Basic Skills Assessment'* pack published by ALBSU.

Induction

Most centres also developed a framework for the induction of new students. Sometimes this consisted of little more than showing a new student round the centre, often using an experienced student to undertake this task. Structured induction appeared to improve retention rates, although some centres were unable to afford the time needed for induction of students individually. Often they did not have enough tutor hours to use for induction, although some centres overcame this by using volunteers or existing students; in others space, or lack of it, was the main problem.

Some centres decided to concentrate on the induction of a group of new students rather than on an individual student. This seems to have had positive advantages in centres where recruitment was high enough for no student to have to wait very long before formally learning about the centre; it was clearly difficult to operate in centres where recruitment of new students was fairly low at some times of the year.

Induction is particularly important in open learning centres. Even people who have been to basic skills programmes before were not familiar with open learning and open learning centres and the approach to learning was different to the approach they experienced before. Furthermore to make the most effective use of the facilities available in a centre, students needed to have a clear idea of where everything was, how to use material and where to go for support.

Induction:

- allowed time for discussion and provided an opportunity to ask and answer questions
- ensured students became familiar with the centre soon after they started to attend
- often brought students together at an early stage.

In addition to 'face to face' induction most open learning centres produced a centre guide and gave a copy to new students. Centre guides varied from single sheets containing brief details to a more comprehensive pack of material. Centre guides didn't replace induction but were used to support induction and help a new student become familiar with what was available, the materials system and how to access resources. Most centre guides included:

- details of opening times
- the location of learning material
- centre rules (smoking, alcohol, equal opportunities, etc.)
- staff and their availability
- examples of record sheets (specimen copies)
- information about other services and opportunities (qualifications available, local guidance services, etc.)

Clearly they had to be written in plain language and, where necessary, explained to a new student. Some open learning centres provided centre guides on audio tape and one centre produced its own video. Using audio tape was of particular benefit to students whose reading skills were low and helped them learn how to use the centre without needing a personal explanation. Some open learning centres also produced audio tape centre guides in a variety of community languages, as well as printing guides in community languages.

Learning Plans

In most open learning centres the development of a learning plan for each student has been crucial in making open learning work. A learning plan provided a framework for each student, gave a sense of direction and encouraged independence. Basic skills has sometimes been weak on the development of learning plans and often students dropped out because they were not sure what they were learning, why they were undertaking particular tasks and what progress they were making. Accreditation has recently improved the planning of learning and open learning centres put a particular emphasis on making sure learning plans were available for each student.

While learning plans differed from centre to centre most placed considerable emphasis on negotiation between a student and the centre. Each student needed to be able to state their goals and what they particularly wanted to work on, as well as the way they wanted to work. Some students were not clear at the outset and staff needed to be pro-active in making suggestions. Poorly conceived and unrealistic objectives had to be modified and whilst each student had to know that they were in control, they also needed to understand that help and advice was available; not just from the staff of the centre but also from other students.

The emphasis of open learning centres was on learning, rather than on teaching. Identifying the skills or competences to be acquired by a

student and the means to acquire them, was crucial to successful learning. Learning objectives had to be set in the context of the wider aims of a student. Often this meant:

- finding the difficult literacy and numeracy tasks in a college student's main course of study
- relating basic skills learning to a trainee's vocational or occupational training programme.

Most open learning centres found that the length of time or the number of learning goals covered by a learning plan had an effect on motivation. If a plan was too long students often lost interest when they experienced difficulties; if it was too short, new plans had to be produced for almost every visit and a learning plan became little more than a programme for a session.

Learning plans usually included:

- aims, objectives and learning goals
- specific areas of, or competences in, basic skills for development
- suggested exercises in books, on worksheets, computer discs and audio and video tapes
- a date for assessment/review.

Assessment

Whilst initial assessment is important, particularly if an effective learning plan is to be developed, assessing progress is essential. Most basic skills students want to know how they are getting on based on an objective assessment rather than on a subjective view. Assessment of progress needs to take place after approximately every 40-60 hours of instruction. In a full-time course (a relatively rare opportunity in basic skills) this might mean assessing progress every 2-3 weeks; in most standard basic skills work, it means assessing progress 2-3 times a year.

In general, open learning centres took assessment of progress very seriously.

Approaches included assessment of progress:

- after the first learning week in the centre
- after induction and three attendances (numbers of attendances varied from centre to centre)
- whenever requested by a student
- after 40-60 hours of teaching
- on achieving broad objectives in a learning plan
- when broad objectives in a learning programme could not be achieved
- after a specified number of units of accreditation have been accumulated
- whenever a major change in a learning plan was envisaged.

Assessing progress depends on effective interview and initial assessment, sensitive induction and coherent plans. Introducing the assessment of progress fairly soon after a student began to attend an open learning centre seems to have been an effective way of reducing drop out. Students were able to see that they had made some progress since coming to the centre and even where progress had been slow, it helped that a student could see that early action was planned.

A variety of different methods of assessing progress were used by different open learning centres. Some centres developed their own material, while others used commercially produced material including ALBSU material.

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Approaches to Learning

THE range of approaches available at open learning centres included:

- supported self-study
- computer-assisted learning
- individual tutorial
- short courses mounted for specific purposes
- distance learning
- learning support for other courses/ programmes
- work related basic skills
- help with ESOL.

Not all centres included all of these approaches, although most included a common core. No open learning centre concentrated on only one learning approach, particularly as centres were established to offer choice. It is fair to say that some of these approaches are available in other types of basic skills provision; they were not unique to open learning centres. However, it was the way in which approaches were used to construct a package of learning that characterised open learning centres. Some of these approaches to learning have been well documented; however, it is worth considering some elements and approaches in more detail.

Short Courses

Some basic skills programmes have always included short courses, often on specific topics such as spelling or metrication. However, much basic skills provision has been 'open ended' and it has been difficult for some students to identify the 'end'. In open learning centres short courses were seen as part of the learning, rather than as something different or additional. Short courses seem to have been successful in open learning centres because they have offered:

- a relatively short term commitment to the particular course
- an effective use of teaching time
- an opportunity to promote the centre in a positive and interesting way to less typical client groups
- an element of group learning and study
- an integrated approach as part of a wider learning plan.

Most courses operated for between four and six weeks, occasionally stretching to eight or ten weeks. Courses needed extensive pre- publicity, both within and outside the centre and the most effective were mounted as a result of identified need. Open learning centres found it useful to use outside specialist trainers and teachers for some short courses.

Distance Learning

Some open learning centres tried to develop distance as an option for students. Distance learning was developed to overcome physical and financial barriers to access, particularly in more rural areas. However, some centres developed distance learning for students in more rural areas because of recognition that some people find it difficult to attend a centre regularly. Distance learning presented some problems, however. It usually depended on few attendances at the centre and difficulties arose over:

- lack of flexibility of many learning packages
- students reading and understanding material
- self-assessment by students
- monitoring progress.

Although a variety of approaches were used, two dominant models of distance learning developed.

- Individual, home-based learning, using paid teachers. This involved:
  - at least two personal visits by a teacher to a student at home, to start the programme
  - a 4-6 week period of distance work, using both print and audio tape
  - an evaluation session,often at the centre, where a learning programme was agreed for the next cycle.
- Group, home based learning, using a paid teacher. This usually involved:
  - a meeting once a month with a group of students usually in the centre
  - distance learning work on an individual basis between group meetings.

This group model developed as a result of asking students when, where and how often they need to meet. It tried to combine the strengths of distance learning with group support and an effective use of staff time. It worked most effectively when students in the group were roughly the same stage of learning or were following a similar course of study, such as Wordpower accreditation. In both models each student had an identified tutor from whom they could get support.

Leicestershire LEA had considerable experience of distance learning in basic skills through an earlier ALBSU funded project and this was used to good advantage. To overcome problems for distance learning students with reading difficulties and to provide effective support, an extensive series of audio tape resources were developed. Some open learning centres tried to establish distance learning that involved telephone tutorial. This was not without problems including:

- telephone costs to the centre
- telephone costs to the student
- the use of a busy telephone line in the centre
- the unreliability of contact between the teacher and student.

The mixture of flexibility, convenience and low or no transport costs for students meant that distance learning was attractive to people:

- with heavy domestic responsibilities
- who find educational institutions threatening
- shift workers
- with disabilities which made travel difficult
- who did not wish to attend an open learning centre regularly.

Where distance learning was developed staff in open learning centres noted that students:

- felt in control of the time, place and pace of their work
- worked well in the absence of the tutor
- took more responsibility and more risks with their work
- did a lot of work when a tutor was present.

Some open learning centres were reluctant to develop distance learning as part of what the centre could offer. In part this was due to the desire to demonstrate that the centre was full, in demand and to ensure that student attendance targets were met. Some open learning centre managers had difficulty convincing senior management of the LEA, college or adult education centre that anything but students in the centre was valid.

Accreditation

The open learning centres initiative was conceived as part of a wider programme to develop and promote accreditation in basic skills. Traditionally, basic skills have not been accredited for adults, although some students have received a variety of certificates in English, Maths and spoken English. In 1998 ALBSU and the BBC decided to develop competence based accreditation in basic skills, related to National Vocational Qualifications and Attainment Targets in the English and Mathematics National Curriculum. There was considerable support from basic skills students and trainees for recognition of their achievements since

leaving school and it was hoped that accreditation would provide this recognition.

Government support for the development of basic skills open learning centres was linked very closely to the development of accreditation and, thus, accreditation featured in the work of most centres. Some centres offered a fairly wide range of accreditation to students. The accreditation scheme developed by ALBSU and the BBC (called Wordpower and Numberpower for short) was available in most open learning centres by the end of central funding.

Learning Support

Just over one third of open learning centres were based in further education colleges. While these centres all recruited students from the local community whose primary purpose was to improve basic skills, they were in the forefront in providing support for students enrolled on full or part time courses in the college. It's estimated that up to 1 in 3 students in colleges of further education require some support with basic skills if they are to gain qualifications at NVQ Level 2 and the open learning centres have played a key role in developing and improving the effectiveness of basic skills support.

Open learning centres enabled college students to work on individual learning programmes related to course requirements. Experienced staff were able to undertake detailed interviews and assessment and better liaison with subject area lecturers was developed in most centres.

One of the major achievements of the centres in basic skills support was overcoming constraints imposed by time-tables. Too often students have failed to take up learning support opportunities, not because of disinterest but because of the time constraints of a busy college day. This problem is often exacerbated in the case of part-time and day-release students.

Locating open learning centres in colleges also led to increased progression to FE. Some centres included short 'taster' courses and pre-enrolment courses because of their close liaison with subject area colleagues. In addition, colleges usually had a wide range of facilities that could be used by basic skills students which were often not so readily available in other centres, such as libraries, creches, advice and guidance services, canteen and leisure facilities.

Some open learning centres in colleges did not manage to strike the right balance between meeting needs of people in the local community and providing basic skills support. In a small number of centres, the concentration on providing support with basic skills for college students became so great that few people from the local community got access to the centre and its resources. Even more worryingly, one or two centres became little more than a convenient room for the location of teaching groups and access for support for individual students was confined to non-timetable periods of the day. In these cases, the original purpose of an open learning centre would have disappeared fairly quickly, if ALBSU had not taken action.

Work related basic skills and training

A major part of the initiative to establish open learning centres was to encourage greater awareness and basic skills training with local industry. Virtually every centre tried to publicise what they could provide to local industry and make contact with employers. The response was uneven and, in many cases, disappointing. We have tried to analyse the reason for this lack of interest. The reasons cited by employers and open learning centres included:

- employers' concern with the recession
- reduced training budgets because of the need for cost cutting
- lack of knowledge or understanding of basic skills.

It has to be said that some open learning centres did not help themselves well to local industry. Sometimes they lacked:

- the skills needed to market training to industry
- staff who understood industry
- time and resources for marketing
- the skills needed to teach basic skills in the context of vocational and occupational training
- the funds to mount work related basic skills courses unless they were income generating.

In general, centre managers were under skilled for this element of development. Some centres presented badly but the majority failed due to lack of expertise and time. Too little development time was available and the demands of income generation that many managers felt under some pressure because of the demand to raise funds rather than see work with industry as an introductory or pilot activity.

In a small number of centres there was an ideological or philosophical resistance to operating this element of the initiative. Staff used a variety of strategies to avoid forming close links with industry, the majority quoted lack of time as a key reason and this, coupled with a developing recession, proved difficult to challenge.

The picture was not entirely bleak, however, and there were examples of high quality, successful work with industry in some of the centres. The most successful work was in the best resourced open learning centres. These centres were able to allocate time and funding to the necessary development work. One centre received external funding and used it to undertake a needs analysis for a local employer that resulted in income generating courses. Centres provided both custom made flexible courses for groups of employees or designed

individual learning programmes. A range of vocationally related basic skills was offered that met both employer and employee need. Companies provided with training frequently asked for courses to be repeated.

Some centres encouraged employers to become members of the centre steering group (in Shrewsbury, Hampshire and Oxford, for example). This provided employers with an opportunity to learn about basic skills and advise on the provision of training for employees. Though this did not necessarily mean that work with industry was any easier to develop, it helped.

Generally, larger employers were more receptive to approaches from open learning centres than smaller employers. Normally such employers had specific training departments, a clear policy on training, some funds for staff training and the ability to provide cover for employees studying during work time. Employers in the public sector, Local Authorities, Health Authorities, Hospitals, Probation Services, etc; became involved as did a number of major private sector companies including TSB, Heathrow Airport, British Rail, Barclays Bank, British Aerospace, Post Office Counters Ltd, Macdonalds, British Gas, Rover and The Automobile Association. During 1991-92 956 employees were recorded as using the

open learning centres with a further 1047 trainees engaged in open learning linked to open learning centres.

ESOL

When the open learning centres were established there was some discussion about whether ESOL could be offered through open learning. Some people felt it was not possible because of the range of support required, especially at the lower levels. The difficulty of accessing material in an unfamiliar language was also seen as a potential problem. Because of this, some centres decided to refer all ESOL students to other local provision; others decided to take a more positive approach.

In the event, more than a quarter of open learning centre students (28% in 1991-92) were students with ESOL needs. Centres that offered ESOL:

- produced material in the main community languages found in their area
- developed audio tape guides and instructions in community languages
- made computer software available in community languages
- recruited staff who were multi-lingual
- trained staff in community languages
- used community tutors to work alongside English speaking open learning staff
- offered specific short courses of interest to local communities in the appropriate community language
- showed awareness of the students' cultures (organising women only days at centres, acknowledging religious festivals etc.).

Learning Material

The majority of the resources used in open learning centres was paper-based, although centres made considerable use of new technology, and to a lesser extent, of video and audio tapes. In open learning the teaching and learning material is crucial. If the material, and the system for access to material is ineffective, open learning will not work very well. Some open learning centres developed study guides to help students choose relevant learning material. Most also developed a system for displaying and storing material. Colour coding was the most widely used system. Coding ensured that material:

- had a consistent format that students recognised
- described how the material related to accreditation such as Wordpower and Numberpower.

Some centres put a good deal of time and effort into producing their own material. Generally material was produced to a high standard, particularly as many centres had access to high quality reprographics. Some poorer quality material was inevitably developed. Often it was too rigid and inflexible for use in open learning or was derivative of commercially published material.

Much of the material used in open learning centres was purchased from a variety of publishers. Lack of planning time for establishing some centres meant that some poor quality material was bought and, this, along with ineffective organisation of resources, presented problems for some centres. Material and their organisation had to be reviewed several times during the first year of opening and this wasted scarce staff time.

Open learning centres found it difficult to make effective use of video. Often it was impossible for students to get easy access to equipment because of security considerations. However, more importantly staff found it difficult to integrate video into learning programmes due to limitations of the technology, such as the difficulty in editing tapes. Furthermore, there were few suitable teaching programmes on video and general programmes, such as those relating to Wordpower, were not well focused. The most widespread use of video was as support material for short courses or with ESOL students.

Information Technology (IT)

One of the main features of basic skills open learning centres was access to technology. In the main this was access to computers, although some centres had access to other technology such as CD-Rom and Desk Top Publishing (DTP). A wide range of hardware was used including Archimedes, Apple Macintosh, Nimbus and IBM or IBM clones. Software ranged from the simple to complex.

Approaches to new technology varied. Many centres held induction sessions where new students were taught to handle the hardware first. Most centres soon abandoned this approach, however. It was found that many students went to an open learning centre with specific basic skills needs and that concentrating on these needs straight away presented computing skills as a means to an end and lessened fear about computers. Furthermore, students needed to know that using computers is not obligatory in open learning.

There is little doubt that new technology was an important factor in the success of the open learning centres. Most centres reported over use of computers, rather than under use. Some problems did arise, particularly where:

- inappropriate hardware and software was purchased
- when a complex network system was set up, but where experienced IT support staff were not available
- when systems for accessing materials were unclear
- where staff changes meant that an essential staff member couldn't be replaced.

Technical support for technology varied from centre to centre. The majority of centres had access to some form of support, though often this is provided on an informal 'favour' basis. Because many open learning centre staff were unfamiliar with new technology they were not, understandably, able to deal with the technical problems associated which arose with hardware. Technical support was, therefore, essential.

Where centres lacked technical support problems with hardware often meant that some computers were out of use for some days and, on occasions, for weeks. This wasted scarce resources and prevented some centres operating effectively. In general, open learning centres which were situated in, or were managed by, colleges of further education had better technical support than most others. It is worrying that about 45% of the open learning centres had little or no technical support.

Some of the open learning centres got 'carried away' to an extent by the access to modern, up to date new technology and began to use the centre for income generating courses unrelated to basic skills. A small number of centres ran short computing courses without a basic skills component to generate income to fund tutor hours and material resources. Whilst this was understandable, particularly where a centre was not well funded, it meant that scarce resources were tied up by fee paying customers to the detriment of basic skills students. In one centre antiquated machinery was made available to individuals with basic skills needs, whilst state of the art technology was used to generate income.

Many of the open learning centres acted as a central resource for basic skills in the area and stimulated the use of new technology across the basic skills curriculum. Whilst access to new technology is still limited in most places, the availability of computers has improved and much of this has been due to the influence of the open learning centres. Experienced open learning staff were much in demand to train other practitioners who now have access to hardware and software. Those without access to the technology have used open learning as an example of good practice to 'lever' resources for their basic skills programme.

The availability of software in a variety of community languages helped to embed the use of computers in ESOL work in open learning. Resources for specific communities were developed and the Whitechapel Open Learning Centre in Tower Hamlets translated 'Wordprocessing for Literacy Skills' (ALBSU) into Bengali and Somali. The wordprocessing package 'Allwrite' (published by ILECC), which is available in a variety of language versions proved a robust and useful resource.

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Providing Support

OPEN learning centres depended on the involvement of committed and skilled basic skills staff just as much as any other basic skills provision. However, staff needed to operate in different, and sometimes unfamiliar, ways. For instance, the amount of time working directly with students was generally less than in much other basic skills work and more than one tutor often worked with the same student.

Often 'key' staff had to combine teaching and managing. Centre managers were responsible for:

- publicising the open learning centre
- overseeing, and sometimes undertaking, initial interviews and assessments
- selecting and purchasing material (including hardware and software)
- adapting material
- developing systems for self-access of material
- advising students on appropriate material
- teaching
- marking assignments
- advice and guidance
- record keeping
- liaising with external agencies
- initiating income generating work.

This was, in any terms, a demanding role and setting priorities became very important. Few of the basic skills staff managing open learning centres had any formal management training, although some LEAs and colleges ensured that they had early access to courses run in the area.

Some of the managers felt more comfortable teaching and often the balance of teaching and managing was not effective where centre managers took on heavy teaching loads. Sometimes, lack of teachers meant that there was little alternative but to take on teaching direct.

The role of administrative support staff in open learning centres was particularly crucial. In the most effective centres they were 'front-line' staff at reception, induction and played a major part in managing the centre and its resources. Unfortunately some open learning centres suffered because of the lack of sufficient support staff and skilled centre managers had to undertake much of the more routine, yet essential, work of the centre.

Teachers had to make major changes to the way they worked and most adapted well. Some direct teaching is an essential part of open learning, but it tends to form a smaller element than in much other basic skills work. teachers in open learning centres also had to develop students' ability to use self-study, new technology and learning packages. The role of the teacher as adviser was emphasised rather more than in much other basic skills work. Adapting to this change of role was not always easy and some centres provided in-service training for teachers in the open learning centre to help them develop new skills and adapt to a different role.

The majority of staff did adapt to this change of role effectively. However, in a small number of open learning centres staff found it difficult to adapt and this presented problems for the development of the centre. Sometimes the problem was that there was a reliance on 'traditional' approaches such as small group teaching; sometimes the dominant model became a workshop approach based on fixed attendance times for each student or a group of students.

Like much innovation in education and training staff selection is crucial. It proved important that staff recruited to work in an open learning centre were keen to use and develop open learning, and were not allocated to teaching in an open

learning centre because they did not have a full teaching load elsewhere.

Volunteers

As well as changes in the role of paid staff working in open learning centres, volunteers in the centres also needed to adapt to a different role. Most volunteers in basic skills either teach an individual student, usually the same student, at each session or help a paid teacher with a group of students. Often volunteers provide the essential support for a beginner student or for students who are struggling to make progress and need a good deal of personal attention.

There is very much less direct teaching in open learning centres than in much other basic skills work and some volunteers were frustrated because they felt that they were underused or because their skills were not used in the way they had thought. Many, although not all, students in the open learning centres do not need or require significant supervision. Most do not need or require direct individual teaching. It was important, therefore, that open learning centres which used volunteers identified clearly the role of volunteers and what support they could provide.

Not all centres chose to involve volunteers. However, in November 1991 464 volunteers were reported as working in open learning centres. Some centres where volunteers were used provided additional training in open learning for volunteers and tried to match closely the role of volunteers to the needs of students using the centre. Volunteers became much more involved in the management of materials and other resources, materials development and reception and induction. In addition they became used as supplementary staff to act as key tutors.

Volunteers also provided useful specialist input with new technology in some centres. At the Swansea Open Learning Centre a volunteer developed good computer based resource material and at other centres lack of technical support from a paid technician was offset by the professional skills of volunteers.

Staff Training

Most staff managing open learning centres were experienced basic skills practitioners. A small

number of centre managers did not have experience in basic skills, although often they were knowledgeable about new technology, marketing or open learning in education. Some of the basic skills practitioners involved in managing open learning centres had experience of workshop provision; very few, however, had direct experience of open learning.

Some managers undertook COLD (the Certificate in Open Learning Delivery) now replaced by ADDFOL (Scheme of Awards in the Development and Delivery of Flexible and Open Learning). In addition local networks developed in most region's staff and staff of the inner-city open learning centres were brought together by ALBSU regularly. The ALBSU Special Development Project **WRITE** provided support with new technology for all the centres through consultancy, telephone support, a regular newsletter and some residential training. ALBSU also mounted a series of national seminars for staff in open learning centres and made funds available, via regional training budgets, to support open learning.

Providing Support

Not all the support provided for students in open learning centres came from paid staff and volunteers. Students offered each other a good deal of informal support and prevented, in the main, open learning becoming an isolating experience. A great deal of mutual support was a feature of almost all of the centres and in several centres, students often arranged to meet when there was no tutor on-duty. Student groups were formed and students often took part in the management of the centres through membership of working parties and the steering group.

Different systems of formal support evolved in different centres. Many centres operated a key tutor system. This meant that individual students were assigned to a named teacher. Each teacher had a group of students to support and monitor on a regular basis. Usually, the key teacher also worked in the centre as part of a rota and gave support to all students using the centre during a particular period of the day. The key tutor played a central role in ensuring that students had continuous support and knew who to go to when they wanted help with a particular problem. The key teacher system worked particularly well in larger centres which had a team of part-time tutors to support the centre manager. However, it was also effective in most smaller centres.

Advice and guidance

Advice and guidance played an important role in most open learning centres. Staff drew upon their own experience and provided informal advice and guidance for students. Many centres developed regular contact and liaison with agencies supplying advice and guidance for education, employment and training. The open learning centres provided advice and guidance through:

- liaison with local Job Centres, Job Clubs
- arranging visits to Job Centres
- time-tabled slots for open learning students at Job Centres
- liaison with Careers Services
- presentations by Careers Officers
- presentations by further education staff on part-time and full time education opportunities
- taster courses to demonstrate the range of educational opportunities in further education
- the use of Training Access Points (TAPs).

Several centres had educational guidance workers attending the open learning centres on a regular basis so that students could consider options for progression. An imaginative outcome of close links with Employment Offices was the time-tabling, by some centres, of Job Centre staff into the open learning centres on a regular weekly basis. Students were able to make an appointment to discuss their employment/training prospects in a familiar environment without having to travel to the Job Centre. Most centres also established good links with their Training & Enterprise Council (TEC).

Conclusion

WE monitored the 83 open learning centres closely. We developed a framework for monitoring the development of each centre and ALBSU Field Officers made at least two visits a year (three in the case of Inner City centres) to each centre. During the period of central government funding over 500 visits were made by ALBSU staff to the 83 centres in England and Wales.

A report was given to the centre and the line-manager after each visit by ALBSU and all of the centres had to produce a written report on progress. A written report was required of each centre twice a year. All of the centres were required to have a steering group and ALBSU Field Officers were members of the steering groups for the centres.

Every basic skills open learning centre was asked to submit statistical information to ALBSU, including information about:

- the ages of students
- gender
- ethnicity
- the employment status of students
- the number of people using the centre
- the number of attendances
- accreditation
- the average length of stay
- links with industry and training
- income generation
- the levels of staffing.

Whilst we believe that most of the open learning centres operated very successfully, a small number of centres did not provide an effective service. Some were poorly located; others had appointed inexperienced and uncommitted staff; some suffered from poor local support; a few were never well funded enough. In some it is not possible to see why they didn't work more effectively.

It is clear, however, that most of the basic skills open learning centres provided valuable new learning opportunities for existing and new students. They provided more intensive teaching and learning opportunities, were open for more weeks in the year than most basic skills programmes, attracted new students and were inexpensive. The total cost of providing help with basic skills for each student who used the centres, including initial development costs for the centres, was less than £200 a year.

The open learning centres also had a major influence in improving the quality of basic skills programmes in the wider LEA or college area. Where there were basic skills open learning centres the quality of work has improved in the area as a whole much more rapidly than in areas where open learning centres did not exist.

The target set for the basic skills open learning centres was 22,000 users in the first 2 years of operation. 39,212 people used the centres in this period, almost double the target number. Of these 57% were people entirely new to basic skills programmes.

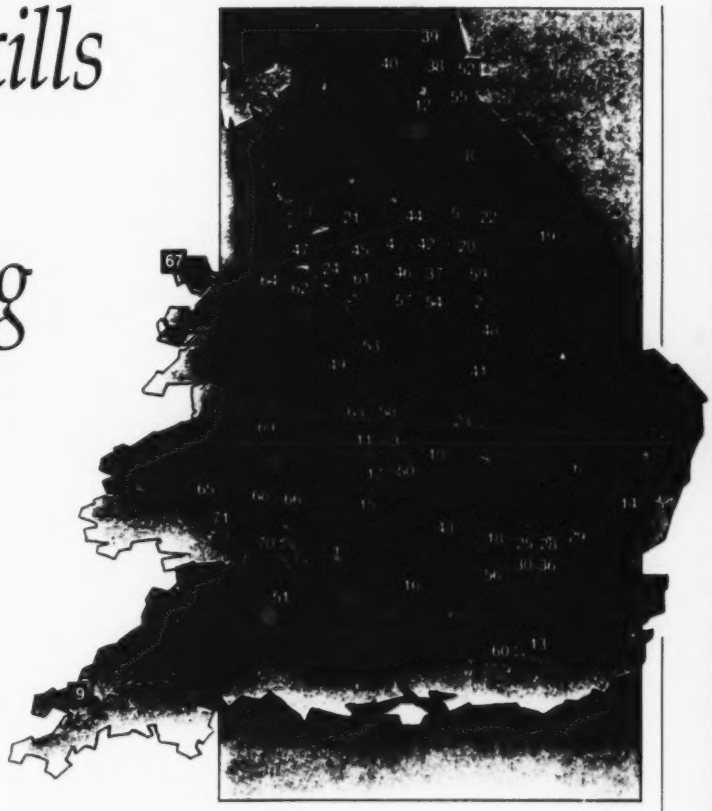
Open learning centres were also successful in getting unemployed people involved. Open learning centres attracted students across a wider age range than in more traditional provision. Whilst the peak age groups remain 26-30 years (18%) and 31-35 years (17%), the younger age groups are close behind, 16-20 years (13%) and 21-25 years (16%). Of equal interest is the considerable number of older users (23% were over 40 years of age).

At the time of writing (March 1993) all the centres have continued to operate in one form or another. Some have continued but have modified or changed their practices to incorporate learning support for students on other educational courses. Some have changed locations, normally to accommodate greater numbers. None of the centres have been moved to a worse location.

The centres continue to influence good practice in basic skills. The procedures developed for interview, record keeping, recording attendance, negotiated learning programmes, assessment of progress and progression have shown how important such systems are, not only in open learning but in all basic skills provision.

Many of the practices are now incorporated, or are in the process of incorporation and development, by other basic skills programmes. We are in no doubt that the open learning centres have made a significant impact and have led to a significant improvement in the quality of basic skills provision in England and Wales. Much of the credit is due to the managers and staff in the centres. They have worked extremely hard to make open learning work, not only in their own centres but in provision in the area. Their efforts changed the face of basic skills work in England and Wales.

Basic Skills Open Learning Centres



1 AVON
Open Learning Centre
12 King Square Avenue
Bristol
BS2 8HU
Tel: 0272 244276

2 BARNSLEY
Open Learning Workshop
Barnsley College
Church Street
Barnsley
Tel: 0226 730191 ex 275

3 BIRMINGHAM
Open Learning Centre
524 Stratford Road
Sparkhill
Birmingham
B11 4AJ
Tel: 021-766 6327

4 BOLTON
The Learning Shop
124 Newport Street
Bolton
Tel: 0204 27995/23936

5 BRADFORD
Bradford and Ilkley Community College
Great Horton Road
Bradford
BD7 1AY
Tel: 0274 753317

6 CAMBRIDGE
Open Learning Centre
Peterborough College of Adult Education
Brook Street
Peterborough
Tel: 0733 896496

Open Learning Centre
Cambridge Regional College
Newmarket Road
Cambridge
CB5 8EG
Tel: 0223 301280

7 CHESHIRE
Runcorn Open Study Centre
Halton College of Further Education
Chapel Street Annexe
York Road
Runcorn
Tel: 0928 574344

8 CLEVELAND
Longlands College of Further Education
Douglas Street
Middlesborough
Cleveland
TS4 2JW
Tel: 0642 232591

9 CORNWALL
Link into Learning Study Centre and Workshop
Cornwall Education Centre
Church Road
Poole
Redruth
Cornwall
Tel: 0209 711942

10 COVENTRY
KIT
Alderman Callow School and Community College
Mitchell Avenue
Canley
Coventry CV4 8PU
Tel: 0203 462356

11 DUDLEY
Study Centre
Halesowen College
Walton Campus
Whittingham Road
Halesowen
B63 4AR

12 DURHAM
Darlington College of Technology
Cleveland Avenue
Darlington
DL3 7BB
Tel: 0325 281025

13 EAST SUSSEX
Open Learning Centre
Brighton College of Technology
C Block
Pelham Street
Brighton
Tel: 0273 667755

14 ESSEX
Open Learning Unit
Colchester Adult Centre
Greyfriars
High Street
Colchester CO1 1UG
Tel: 0206 47045/45514

15 GLOUCESTER
The Learning Space
15 Spa Road
Gloucester
Tel: 0452 425872

16 HAMPSHIRE
Open Learning Centre for
Communication Skills
Cricklade House
Cricklade College
Charlton Road
Andover
Hampshire SP10 1EJ
Tel: 0264 334523

17 HEREFORD & WORCESTER
The Access Centre
Wallace House
Oat Street
Evesham WR11
Tel: 0386 40135

18 HERTFORDSHIRE
Callowland Open Learning Centre
Cassio College
Callowland Annexe
Leavesden Road
Watford
WD2 5EF
Tel: 0923 255533

19 HUMBERSIDE
Humberside Easy Learning Project
Adult Education Centre
Eastfield
Hull
Tel: 0482 51238

20 KIRKLEES
Know It All
Open Learning Centre
Dewsbury Town Hall
Town Hall Way
Dewsbury
WF12 8DG
Tel: 0924 463607

21 LANCASHIRE
Open Learning Centre
Preston College
St Vincent's Road
Fulwood
Preston PR2 4RY
Tel: 0772 716511

22 LEEDS
Burton Road Centre
Burton Road (off Dewsbury Road)
Beeston
Leeds LS11 5EA
Tel: 0532 778228

23 LEICESTERSHIRE
Open Learning Centre
129 Evington Road
Leicester
Tel: 0533 662706

24 LIVERPOOL
DISC Project
Sandown College
Broadgreen Road
Liverpool L13 5SQ

25 BRENT
Open Learning
38 Craven Park Road
London NW10 4AB
Tel: 081-963 0951

26 EALING
Open Learning Centre
ETC Acton Site
Woodland's Building
Mill Hill Road
Acton, London
W3 8UX
Tel: 081-992 3263

27 HARINGEY
Open Learning Centre
College of NE London
Tottenham Green Centre
Town Hall Approach Road
London N15
Tel: 081-808 0141

28 HARROW
Open Learning Centre
153a Uxbridge Road
Hatch End
Pinner
HA5 4EH
Tel: 081-428 0522

29 HAVERING
Open Learning Centre
Havering College of Adult
Education
Romford Centre
Marshalls Park (upper) School
Havering Drive
Romford
Tel: 0708 733014

30 HILLINGDON
Pinkwell Open Learning Centre
Pinkwell Adult Education Centre
Pinkwell Lane
Hayes
UB3 1PE
Tel: 081-848 8841

31 KENSINGTON & CHELSEA
North Kensington Basic Skills
Open Learning Centre
Kensington & Chelsea Adult
Education College
Wornington Road
London W10 5QQ
Tel: 071-351 7127

32 MERTON
Open Learning Centre
Merton College
Morden Park
London Road
Morden
SM4 5QX
Tel: 081-640 3001

33 NEWHAM
Newham Parents' Centre
743 747 Barking Road
Plaistow
London E13 9ER
Tel: 081-472 2000

34 SOUTHWARK
Tabard Open Learning Centre
Tabard Centre
Southwark Adult Education
Institute
Hunter Close
London SE1
Tel: 071-357 7721 ext 76

35 TOWER HAMLETS
Arbour Square Open Learning and Literacy Resource Centre
Tower Hamlets College
Arbour Square Centre
Arbour Square
London E1 0PT
Tel: 071-538 5888 ext 123

36 WALTHAM FOREST
Harrow Green Open Learning Centre
Harrow Green Adult Education Centre
Above Harrow Green Library
Cathall Road
Leytonstone
London E11
Tel: 081-556 1627

37 MANCHESTER
Alpha Flexible Learning
The Birley Centre
Chichester Road
Hulme
Manchester
M15 5FU
Tel: 061-226 3969

38 NEWCASTLE
Todds Nook Adult Education Centre
Monday Crescent
Fenham
Newcastle upon Tyne
Tel: 091-272 1411

39 NORTH TYNESIDE
Killingworth Open Learning Centre
The George Stephenson Centre
Communicare
Citadel East
Killingworth
Tyne & Wear
NE12 0UQ
Tel: 091-216 0071

40 NORTHUMBERLAND
The Gatehouse
Beaumont Middle School
Hexham
Northumberland
Tel: 0434 607955

41 NOTTINGHAM
Online to Learn
People's College
Maid Marion Way
Nottingham
NG7 6AB
Tel: 0602 509100/506661

42 OLDHAM
Open Learning Workshop
Cardinal Street Centre
Oldham
OL1 3TB
Tel: 061-624 3507

43 OXFORDSHIRE
ABLE Open Learning Centre
Peers School Campus
Sandy Lane West
Oxford
OX4 5JY
Tel: 0865 776334

44 ROCHDALE
ABE Open Learning Centre
Hopwood Hall College
St Mary's Gate
Rochdale
OL12 6RY
Tel: 0706 345346 ext 3432

45 ST HELENS
The Learning Workshops
St Helens College
Brook Street
St Helens
Tel: 0744 33766 ext 257

46 SALFORD
Ordsall Open Learning Centre
Ordsall Library
Tatton Street
Ordsall
Salford
Tel: 061-848 8549

47 SEFTON
The Drop In Centre
Adult Education Centre
53 Cambridge Road
Seaforth
Liverpool
L21 1EZ
Tel: 051-928 0765

48 SHEFFIELD
Sheffield Colleges Open Learning Centre
Shirecliffe House
Shirecliffe Lane
Sheffield
S3 9AE
Tel: 0742 750546

49 SHROPSHIRE
Bridge Open Learning Centre
TCAT
Haybridge Road
Wellington
Telford
TF1 2NP
Tel: 0952 641997

Second Change Open Learning Centre
Festival Drayton Centre
Market Drayton
TF9 3AX
Tel: 0630 65552

50 SOLIHULL
Centre 159 – Sharman's Cross
159 Solihull Road
Shirley
Solihull
B90 3LQ
Tel: 021-733 2752

51 SOMERSET
Street Open Learning Centre
Crispin Hall Street
Street
Somerset
Tel: 0458 47248

Mulberry Information Centre
52 Clare Street
Bridgewater
Somerset
Tel: 0278 428517

Archbishop Cranmer School
(Community Education Office)
Taunton
Somerset
Tel: 0823 338408

Adult Learning Centre
United Reform Church
Whittox Lane
Frome
BA11 3AZ
Tel: 0373 65185

Adult Basic Education
The Annexe
Reckleford Centre
18 Eastland Road
Yeovil BA21 4ET
Tel: 0935 33426

Adult Basic Education
Vennlands Vocational Education Centre
Ponsford Road
Minehead TA24 5DX
Tel: 0643 703099

52 SOUTH TYNESIDE
Learning Support Centre
Stanhope Complex
Gresford Street
South Shields
NE33 4SZ
Tel: 091-455 2444

53 STAFFORDSHIRE
Willfield Open Learning Centre
Willfield & Queensbury
Community Education Centre
Lauder Place North
Bentilee
Stoke on Trent
ST2 0QL
Tel: 0782 599144

54 STOCKPORT
Flexible Learning Unit
Stockport College of Further and
Higher Education
Wellington Road South
Stockport
SK1 3YW
Tel: 061-474 3769

55 SUNDERLAND
Foundation Skills Open Learning
Centre
15 John Street
Sunderland
SR1 1HT
Tel: 091-564 1687

56 SURREY
Spelthorne Adult Education
Institute
36 Kingston Road
Staines
TW18 4LN
Tel: 0784 457372

57 TAMESIDE
ABE drop-in
Tameside College
Beaufort Road
Ashton Under Lyne
Tel: 061-330 6911

58 WAKEFIELD
Castleford Education
Opportunities Centre
Church Street East
Castleford
West Yorkshire
WF10 1IT
Tel: 0977 553998

59 WALSALL
Basic Skills Open Learning Centre
Butts Centre
Butts Road
Walsall

Midland Road Centre
Midland Road
Walsall
WS1 3QQ
Tel: 0922 721114 721421

60 WEST SUSSEX
ABE Centre
Northbrook College of Design &
Technology
Broadwater Road
Worthing
West Sussex
BN14 8HJ
Tel: 0903 32071

Crawley College Annexe
Gales Place
Three Bridges
Crawley
RH10 1QC
Tel: 0293 24179

61 WIGAN
Adult Basic Education Centre
Tyldesley Centre
Upper George Street
Tyldesley
M29 8HQ
Tel: 0942 883139

62 WIRRAL
The Learning Centre
Wirral Metropolitan College
Borough Road
Birkenhead
Tel: 051-653 5555 ext 6526

63 WOLVERHAMPTON
Gate Open Learning Centre
11 Clarence Street
Wolverhampton
Tel: 0902 714339

WALES

64 CLWYD
Second Chance Centre
Rhyl Library
Church Street
Rhyl
Clwyd
Tel: 0745 344153

65 DYFED
The Avenue Learning Centre
Avenue Villas
Lloyd Street
Llanelli
SA15 2PU
Tel: 0554 776528

66 GWENT
Ebbw Vale Open Learning Centre
Ebbw Vale Community Education
Centre
Church Street
Ebbw Vale
Gwent
NP3 6BE
Tel: 0495 303544

67 GWYNEDD
Canolfan Frondeg
Yr Ala
Pwllheli
Gwynedd
Tel: 0758 701 397

Hollyhead Open Learning Centre
Holyhead Library
Newry Fields
Holyhead
Gwynedd
Tel: 0407 762 917

68 MID GLAMORGAN
Open Learning Centre
67/68 High Street
Merthyr Tydfil
Tel: 0685 77706

69 POWYS
Open Learning Centre
The Manse
Commercial Street
Ystradgynlais
Powys
Tel: 0639 844 030

70 SOUTH GLAMORGAN
Barry Open Learning Centre
c/o Holton Road Junior School
Holton Road
Barry
CF6
Tel: 0446 734844

71 WEST GLAMORGAN
Open Learning Centre
YMCA Building
The Kingsway
Swansea
West Glamorgan
Tel: 0792 470611

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